

## The 1907 ‘last generally accepted record’ of huia (*Heteralocha acutirostris*) is unreliable

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Accounts of the extinct huia, *Heteralocha acutirostris*, almost invariably comment that it was last recorded in 1907. This has been repeated so often that current authorities such as the *Checklist and Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand* (Gill et al. 2010; Heather et al. 2015), even while noting that there are ‘quite credible reports to mid-1920s’, still concede that 1907 was the ‘Last generally accepted record’. Other authors have referred to the 1907 record as ‘reliable’ (Oliver 1955; Fleming 1982; Gill & Martinson 1991), ‘unquestioned’ (Greenway 1958), ‘confirmed’ (Higgins et al. 2006), ‘authenticated’ (Fuller 1987), ‘accredited’ (Halliday 1978), or ‘official’ (Williams 1981). Some even give an exact date for the record: 28 December 1907 (Gill & Martinson 1991; Oliver 1955). However, it is not at all clear what the record is based on, or why it should be considered more reliable than other, later records of huia. This paper investigates these questions.

The 1907 record has become so widely accepted and so often repeated that in most cases no reference to the source of the information is considered necessary. Of all the authors cited above only 2 give any reference: Higgins et al. (2006) refer to Oliver (1955) as source, and Greenway (1958) refers to Myers (1923). The record in Oliver (1955) can be

traced back to that in his earlier edition (Oliver 1930), which matches almost word for word the record as given by Myers (1923): ‘*So far as the writer is able to ascertain, the last specimens of this famous and anomalous species actually seen by an ornithologist were two males and a female observed by Mr. W.W. Smith on the 28th December, 1907*’. This is evidently Oliver’s unacknowledged source, and the ultimate source of all the above citations and many more like them.

Myers (1923) quoted the record as part of his survey of ‘*The present position of the endemic birds of New Zealand*’. This was based on observations collected from ‘*practically every bird-lover in New Zealand with whom the writer was able to get in touch*’, among whom Myers acknowledges W.W. Smith. Like many of Myers’ informants, Smith was a member of the only ornithological society in the region at the time, the Royal Australasian Ornithologists’ Union – hence Myers’ description of him as ‘*an ornithologist*’. Smith was evidently the only one of Myers’ informants to provide a report of huia, although, as Myers commented, there had been other reports from ‘*non-scientific observers*’ even up to the time he wrote, in 1922. But by his terminology Myers implicitly ascribed greater authority to Smith’s 1907 record than to those later reports, and subsequent authors continued that process to make Smith’s the ‘*last generally accepted record*’.

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A little more information on Smith's 1907 record of huia can be gleaned from letters from Myers to Smith in Smith's papers in ARC2001-163, Puke Ariki archives, New Plymouth, and replies from Smith to Myers in file CA000450/001/0009, Te Papa Archives, Wellington. Myers first wrote to Smith on 7 August 1922, asking for records of endemic birds and adding '*Needless to say no localities will be published*' (evidently out of concern about giving any leads to commercial 'collectors'). After Smith replied agreeing to assist, Myers wrote again on 18 August thanking him and adding the news that '*opossum trappers recently reported huias in the Tararuas*'. Smith evidently wrote back relating his own earlier records of huia but, frustratingly, this crucial letter is missing. All we have is Myers' reply of 11 September: '*Many thanks indeed for your letter, with the interesting account of the huias on Mt Holdsworth*'. Myers evidently based his published record of W.W. Smith's huia sighting on the account in that missing letter, but as he had promised he did not publish the locality. However, the Mt Holdsworth locality did become known, and published, by others in their circle (Wilkinson 1924; Stidolph 1929, 1971).

Altogether, the record of Smith's sighting of huia as reported by Myers, Wilkinson and Stidolph appears quite definite and precise. However, it is second-hand, and 15 years after the event. What about Smith himself – who was he and what did he record of his huia sighting?

William Walter Smith (1852-1942) was a Scottish-born gardener who worked at country estates and municipal parks in Canterbury, while also becoming known as an expert in natural history and an advocate for the conservation of native flora and fauna. The high point of his career was his appointment in 1904 to a new Scenery Preservation Commission which inspected areas of scenic or historic interest throughout the country and recommended which should be reserved. But in 1906 the Commission was disbanded and Smith returned to gardening work. In December 1907, at the time of the reported huia sighting, he had just gained appointment as curator of reserves in Palmerston North. He was there only briefly before moving to a similar position in New Plymouth, where he lived for the rest of his life (Galbreath 1996; Roche 2016).

Although Smith's name is now mentioned more often in relation to the 1907 huia record than anything else he did, this arises entirely from its citation by Myers (1923); extensive searching has found no mention of the sighting by Smith himself in any of his published papers and articles, or in his surviving correspondence and manuscript material preserved in various archives. The only references to his huia sighting found so far are in letters Smith wrote to newspapers in the early 1900s about the

need to protect the huia against the depredations of 'collectors' hunting it mainly for its feathers. Wearing the huia feather had become fashionable in colonial society, especially after the Duke of York wore one during his royal visit in 1901, and although the huia was legally protected this hardly restrained hunters when a single tail feather became worth as much as a week's wages. After the issue was raised in parliament in November 1907 Smith wrote several letters urging action to save the species. In the course of a long letter to the *New Zealand Times* he noted how scarce huia had become and that he had been fortunate to see any: '*Whilst exploring recently for several days in a remote North Island mountain range, I enjoyed the company one morning of a pair of charming huias. I also heard the peculiar notes of a huia the following morning; but these were all I saw and heard during the four days I was traversing the wooded valleys*' (Smith 1907).

He addressed another letter making the same point to a friend in Christchurch – evidently James Drummond, chief reporter for the *Lyttelton Times*. The letter was duly reported in that paper and copied in several others: '*Mr W.W. Smith . . . says that collectors are killing rare species of native birds, and he suggests that more effective means should be taken to save [them] . . . During a week's explorations on the Tararua and Ruahine ranges, Mr Smith had the good fortune to meet with a pair of huias*' (Anon. 1908).

In these letters Smith was deliberately vague about where he had seen huia, explaining that '*it is extremely unwise to make known the locality where rare and commercially valuable native birds inhabit . . . for alas! as I have often noted in the newspapers the ruthless hands of mercenary men are daily upon them*' (Smith 1907). He was marginally clearer about the locality in later comments to another friend, who in turn passed them on to Drummond for publication: '*Mr W.W. Smith . . . told him that two or three years ago, when he was conducting botanical studies, he camped in the distant recesses of the Tararua, and was fortunate enough to see a pair of huias*' (Drummond 1910).

These 3 reports are consistent about Smith sighting a pair of huia during an exploration of several days in the Tararua ranges some time 'recently' before his letter to the *New Zealand Times*, which is dated 21 December 1907. But these details do not match those given later in Myers (1923) of '*two males and a female observed . . . on the 28th December, 1907.*' Were there 2 separate sightings by Smith? That seems unlikely, and certainly Smith's comments to his friend several years later (Drummond 1910) suggest that he had seen huia just the once. If so, Myers' date of 28 December 1907 cannot be correct. In support of this, despite much searching no evidence has been found that Smith did observe huia then, or that he made any expedition at that time to Mt Holdsworth, the specific locality

indicated in Myers' correspondence, or anywhere in the Tararuas. If he had been to Mt Holdsworth in particular there would probably be some record of it. In 1907 the track up Mt Holdsworth had been upgraded and it became a popular excursion. The weekend of 28-29 December was particularly popular – the *Wairarapa Daily Times* the next day has reports with names of several parties, and the track visitors' book (now held at MS-Papers-2510-6/5, Alexander Turnbull Library) has 57 signatures for those 2 days. But Smith does not appear in the newspaper reports or in the visitors book then or at any other time (the visitors' book runs from 1 December 1907 to March 1919). Indeed, it is difficult to see how Smith could have been on Holdsworth or anywhere else where he might have seen huia on Saturday 28 December, as his working hours in Palmerston North extended to 1pm on Saturdays (see the 'Conditions of Employment' for a salaried Council employee at that time, in PNCC Series 1/10/2, Box 4, File 6, Ian Matheson City Archives, Palmerston North), and having only just begun in his position Smith could not have taken leave then. In view of all this, Myers' (1923) date of 28 December 1907 must be considered unreliable at best.

If not then, when did Smith see huia? That is most uncertain. On the one hand Smith's comment in his letter to the *New Zealand Times* in December 1907 that he had seen a pair 'recently' could be taken to mean earlier that year. But although there are many records of his activities through 1907, especially in the later months, there is no indication of an expedition into the Tararuas or to Mt Holdsworth any time that year.

On the other hand, in that letter about the need to save the huia Smith commented that '*Two years ago I tried to impress the absolute need of such action on Mr T.E. Donne – when I met him at Rotorua – and offered to give practical assistance gratuitously in snaring and transferring them to some safe retreat*' (Smith 1907). Donne was Superintendent of the Department of Tourist and Health Resorts, which had been making rather desultory efforts to obtain huia for transfer. Smith did meet Donne in Rotorua, in November 1905 when Donne spent a day with the Scenery Preservation Commission there (confirmed by the Commission's minute book, R17047694, Archives New Zealand, Wellington). Would Smith have offered to assist Donne in snaring and transferring huia if he had never seen the bird and did not know at least 1 place where it might be found? This raises the possibility that his huia sighting might have been rather earlier, before November 1905. This would also fit with the only time Smith is on record as being on Mt Holdsworth: in a letter to the *Wairarapa Daily Times* in November 1906 promoting Holdsworth as a scenic attraction, Smith noted that he had climbed it '*Last year*' (Smith 1906). So his

huia sighting on Holdsworth may well have been in 1905 rather than 1907. However, there is no positive evidence for either possibility.

Altogether, we must conclude that the record of W.W. Smith's sighting of huia is not as definite or reliable as has been assumed. The version given by Myers (1923) and accepted since, of '*two males and a female observed . . . on the 28th December, 1907*', is contradicted by Smith's earlier newspaper reports and other evidence. These indicate only that Smith claimed to have seen a pair of huia, probably somewhere in the Tararua ranges, probably sometime in 1905-07. Thus unless some further documentation of it is found, Smith's '1907' sighting of huia, that has so often been quoted as the '*last generally accepted record*', must fall into the category of unconfirmed, along with those of many less-scientific observers then and later – just another part of the mythology that has grown up around this enigmatic bird.

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